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ABSTRACT

In early 2003, Public Agenda surveyed 503 Californians statewide to determine their attitudes toward higher education. In addition, two focus groups were held in Santa Clara, California. Statewide surveys had also been conducted in 1993 and 1996. In many ways, the attitudes of Californians were similar to those of respondents to a national survey. Four major conclusions emerged: (1) Californians believe that higher education is vitally important for success in the contemporary world, with 85% agreeing that a college degree has become as important as a high school diploma used to be; (2) higher education is more than just a piece of paper, with 69% of respondents agreeing that the interpersonal skills learned in college are absolutely essential; (3) Californians believe that the main responsibility for success in higher education rests with the students, but they also expect institutions to help those who help themselves; and (4) Californians believe that paying for college is difficult but feasible, although 64% of Californians surveyed agreed that families are not doing a good job saving for college. Comparison of the survey findings with those from earlier surveys show that Californians see some improvement in access to higher education. In some ways, Californians differed from the national sample. Californians were more likely to regard underprepared students as a problem, and they were more likely to see community colleges as a solution to the problem of underprepared students. (SLD)

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS: How Californians View Higher Education

John Immerwahr

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

August 2000

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GREAT EXPECTATIONS:

How Californians View Higher Education

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR
PUBLIC POLICY AND
HIGHER EDUCATION

GREAT EXPECTATIONS:

How Californians View Higher Education

By John Immerwahr

A Report Prepared by Public Agenda
And Funded by The James Irvine Foundation

August 2000

NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION
PUBLIC AGENDA

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Foreword

Great Expectations: How Californians View Higher Education is part of a broader effort of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda to stimulate a public discussion about the role of colleges and universities in maintaining and enhancing the opportunities for all Americans to participate fully in our society. This special survey complements a larger survey administered to the entire nation and released in May, called *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education.* These reports are available in full at www.highereducation.org, and in summary at www.publicagenda.org.

John Immerwahr, the author of both the national and California reports, has done a masterful job of explaining the most significant trends in public attitudes about higher education, and of illuminating the key similarities and differences between the views of Californians and Americans generally. His findings are based on a national sample of over 1,000 adults and a state sample of over 500 Californians. He also had the opportunity to discuss higher education issues with two groups of citizens in Santa Clara.

We would like to thank The James Irvine Foundation for sponsoring this special survey of Californians' attitudes. We would also like to extend our appreciation to the organizations whose financial support made the national report possible: The Ford Foundation, the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, and the National Center for Postsecondary Improvement.

Patrick M. Callan
President
National Center for Public Policy
and Higher Education

In early 2000, Public Agenda surveyed 503 Californians statewide to determine their attitudes toward higher education. In addition, we held two focus groups in Santa Clara. We also conducted two previous statewide surveys in 1993 and 1996. Although most of the questions in the 2000 study were new, we did use several questions from the earlier studies, giving us an opportunity to track changes.

In many ways, the attitudes of Californians regarding higher education are strikingly similar to the views of the nation as a whole, as revealed in our large scale survey of public attitudes, *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education.* Four major conclusions emerged from our California research, which are also supported by what we found nationwide. In addition, the final section of this report describes a few areas where the attitudes of Californians differ somewhat from those of Americans generally.

For the purpose of this research, we define *higher education* broadly to include all education and training beyond high school, including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions.

Finding One:

CALIFORNIANS BELIEVE THAT HIGHER EDUCATION IS VITALLY IMPORTANT FOR SUCCESS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD.

Most people in California believe that a higher education is essential for a person to succeed in today's world. In effect, California residents now see a college education as having replaced a high school diploma as the minimum entry ticket to a solid job and a middle-class lifestyle.

In the survey we found:

- ★ Fully 85% strongly or somewhat agree that a college degree has become as important as a high school diploma used to be.
- ★ Only 13% think that it is possible to reach a point where too many people have a college degree; the overwhelming majority (81%) believe that this is one area where there can never be too much of a good thing.

As higher education is being seen as more important for success in today's economy and society, the public is also placing a premium on the significance of preserving access to higher education for anyone who is sufficiently qualified and motivated. In effect, Californians see access to higher education as equivalent to access to the American dream. They believe that it is vitally important that we provide adequate opportunities for a higher education to all qualified and motivated individuals.

Specifically, Californians do not want students to be excluded from a college education by cost alone. Seventy-three percent strongly agree that we should not allow the price of a college education to keep qualified and motivated students from going to college. The percentage of Caifornians who feel this way is significantly higher today than in the recent past, as shown in our two previous studies; fewer (66%) strongly agreed in 1993, and this percentage dropped in 1996 to 53%.

Finding Two:

HIGHER EDUCATION IS MORE THAN JUST A PIECE OF PAPER.

Californians have high expectations for what they expect students to take away from a college education. We presented respondents with a list of factors and asked how important each was as a goal for a college education. One of the most important factors for California residents is that students gain a sense of maturity and learn how to manage on their own, with 69% saying that this is absolutely essential. An equally high percentage (69%) say that it is absolutely essential for students to learn how to get along with people different from themselves.

Although these general interpersonal skills top the list, there are a number of other skills that Californians rate as absolutely essential, such as learning to solve problems and think analytically (65%), learning high-tech skills (60%), learning the specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen (56%), and gaining top-notch writing and speaking skills (59%).

The California public also has high expectations for the administrators who run local colleges and universities. For example, 68% say it is absolutely essential for colleges to hire good teachers and researchers, and 54% stress that colleges should ensure that students work hard to achieve high academic standards.

The majority of people in the state value the education that a student receives, not just the piece of paper. Fifty-eight percent believe that college graduates get higher salaries because having a college degree means that the person has skills and accomplishments, as opposed to 37% who think that employers just get impressed by a degree.

The public has high expectations, but they also seem to be pleased with the job California's public and private colleges and universities are doing, especially as compared to the performance of the state's high schools. Fifty-seven percent give the state's colleges an excellent or a good rating, as opposed to only 26% who give state high schools an excellent or good rating.

Finding Three:

CALIFORNIANS BELIEVE THAT THE MAIN RESPONSIBILITY FOR SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESTS WITH THE STUDENT, BUT THEY ALSO EXPECT INSTITUTIONS TO HELP THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES.

The California public sees a higher education not as an entitlement, but as something students should have to work for, and the notion of a free higher education is not attractive to very many state residents. Seventy-one percent strongly or somewhat agree that students only appreciate the value of an education when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs.

By the same token, California residents feel that what a student gets out of a college education is largely a result of the amount of effort the student puts in. We asked our California respondents whether the benefits of a higher education depend more on how much effort the student puts in or on the quality of the college. The overwhelming majority (84%) said that effort was the key.

Californians also placed the responsibility for success in college on the student. Seventy-four percent say that when a student falls behind, it is primarily the responsibility of the student to get back on track. This does not mean that colleges have no responsibility; 65% also agree that colleges should provide advisors and counselors for students who fall behind, rather than take more severe measures.

When it comes to financial aid, Californians continue to emphasize individual effort, believing that aid should go first to students who work hard. Eighty-two percent say that they would prefer to give financial aid to a student with average skills who works hard, rather than to a student with excellent skills who does not work hard.

Finding Four:

PAYING FOR COLLEGE IS DIFFICULT BUT DOABLE.

College is perceived as expensive, and 64% of California residents strongly or somewhat agree that families are not doing a good job of saving for college. Californians are evenly divided on the question of whether there are many qualified people who are currently unable to go to college. Forty-eight percent feel that there are many people who are qualified to go to college but do not have an opportunity to do so, as compared to 46% who say that the vast majority of those who are qualified have an opportunity to do so.

But in the end, the majority of Californians are convinced that where there is a will, there is a way. Eighty-eight percent either strongly (64%) or somewhat (24%) agree that people who really want to go to college can find a way to pay for it even if they have to go to school and work at the same time.

Californians also support a broad range of financial aid proposals, with 78% thinking that the government should offer more tax breaks for students, 73% favoring more funds for work-study, and 55% favoring more money for loans. Direct grants to students were somewhat less popular; only 46% favored more money for grants.

Changes in Attitudes over Time

We also studied Californians' attitudes toward higher education in 1993 and 1996, although for the most part we were interested in different topics for those studies. One area that we did track had to do with the perceived opportunity of various groups to gain access to higher education.

As the chart on page 5 shows, Californians see some improvement in access to higher education. The perception of the situation for both middle-class and low-income students has improved. In 1993, 61% said that low-income students had less opportunity to attend college than others, but by 2000 that number had dropped to 47%. We saw a similar drop in the perception that middle-class students had problems (from 22% to 10%). The perception of the situation for minorities has remained unchanged. Interestingly, people are now more likely to say there are problems for older people going back for retraining. When we probed this response with focus group participants in other states, they said that people are working longer hours now and no longer can take the time to go back to college. The improvement in the economy, in other words, may be making it seem harder for older people to get retraining.

California and the Nation at Large

In many of the areas we have discussed so far, the attitudes of Californians are not significantly different from those of the nation as a whole. There are a few areas, however, where the attitudes of Californians do differ somewhat from the national perspective.

One area of difference concerns the issue of underprepared students. Nearly half (48%) of Californians think it's a problem in their state that students struggle when they get to college because they are not academically prepared, as opposed to 10% who do not think this is a problem (42% say they don't know enough to say). The percentage of Californians who think this is a problem is significantly higher than the nation as a

Do you think qualified students from [INSERT ITEM] have less opportunity, more opportunity or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?

% saying group has "less opportunity."	1993	1996	2000
Qualified students from low-income families, regardless of their ethnic background	61%	52%	47%
People who are older and are going back to school for retraining	29	22	34
Qualified students who are ethnic or racial minorities, such as blacks or Latinos	35	32	34
Qualified students from middle-class families, regardless of their ethnic background	22	22	10

1993, n = 832; 1996, n = 800; 2000, n = 503.

whole, where only 37% identify this as a problem (and a much larger 52% say they don't know enough to say). This may also be related to the negative evaluation that Californians give to their high schools. Fifty-five percent of Californians give their state public high schools a rating of only fair or poor, as compared to 41% nationwide.

Conversely, Californians were much more likely to see community colleges as a solution to the problem of underprepared students. We asked our California residents what to do with college applicants who lack the necessary skills to succeed in college. Sixty-three percent of Californians thought that the solution was to admit these students to a two-year college, as compared to a smaller percentage nationwide (53%) who thought so.

This response was particularly evident in our focus groups in Santa Clara. While some of our respondents in other states struggled with the problem of what to do with students who couldn't handle college work, for our California respondents this was a "no brainer"—if a student isn't ready for a four-year college, send him or her to community college. In general, community colleges appear to be a much more positive alternative in California than in some other states. Even those California parents who expected their students to eventually graduate from a four-year college often saw community college as the first step.

Supporting Tables

Table One

Satisfaction with High Schools and Colleges

Are the [INSERT ITEM] in your state doing an excellent, good, fair or poor job, or don't you know enough to say?

% responding	*National*	*California*
Public High Schools		
Excellent	6	4
Good	27	22
Fair	28	35
Poor	13	19
Don't Know	25	20
Colleges		
Excellent	15	12
Good	42	44
Fair	13	18
Poor	3	3
Don't Know	28	24
Four-Year Colleges		
Excellent	15	14
Good	40	42
Fair	10	14
Poor	2	3
Don't Know	33	27
Two-Year Colleges		
Excellent	14	8
Good	36	41
Fair	14	17
Poor	2	4
Don't Know	34	30

National, n = 1,015; California, n = 503.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Table Two

Attitudes toward Higher Education

% responding	National	California
We should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so		
Strongly agree	78	73
Somewhat agree	15	18
Somewhat disagree	3	3
Strongly disagree	2	3
A college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be		
Strongly agree	68	63
Somewhat agree	19	22
Somewhat disagree	8	8
Strongly disagree	4	5
If someone really wants to go to college, they can find a way to pay for it, even if they have to go to school and work at the same time		
Strongly agree	63	64
Somewhat agree	24	24
Somewhat disagree	8	6
Strongly disagree	5	6
Today's colleges should be doing a much better job of keeping their costs down		
Strongly agree	60	54
Somewhat agree	23	27
Somewhat disagree	7	10
Strongly disagree	4	3
Students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education		
Strongly agree	56	51
Somewhat agree	24	24
Somewhat disagree	11	13
Strongly disagree	4	6
Students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs		
Strongly agree	47	42
Somewhat agree	27	28
Somewhat disagree	16	19
Strongly disagree	8	7
Almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid		
Strongly agree	33	35
Somewhat agree	29	29
Somewhat disagree	17	15
Strongly disagree	15	14
There are too many students in college who don't belong there		
Strongly agree	27	27
Somewhat agree	22	17
Somewhat disagree	22	26
Strongly disagree	18	20
Most families today do a good job of saving for their children's college education		
Strongly agree	10	9
Somewhat agree	18	20
Somewhat disagree	33	31
Strongly disagree	32	33

National, n = 1,015; California, n = 503.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Table Three

What Should a Student Gain from College?

How important is each of the following in terms of what students should gain from attending college? [INSERT ITEM] Is that absolutely essential, important but not essential, or not too important?

% responding	*National*	*California*
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own		
Absolutely essential	71	69
Important but not essential	26	27
Not too important	2	4
An ability to get along with people different from themselves		
Absolutely essential	68	69
Important but not essential	29	28
Not too important	2	3
An improved ability to solve problems and to think analytically		
Absolutely essential	63	65
Important but not essential	34	32
Not too important	1	2
Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet		
Absolutely essential	61	60
Important but not essential	35	37
Not too important	4	3
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they have chosen		
Absolutely essential	60	56
Important but not essential	35	39
Not too important	4	4
Top-notch writing and speaking skills		
Absolutely essential	57	59
Important but not essential	38	38
Not too important	4	3
The responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering		
Absolutely essential	44	43
Important but not essential	47	49
Not too important	9	8
Exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history		
Absolutely essential	32	32
Important but not essential	53	55
Not too important	14	13

National, n = 1,015; California, n=503.

Note: Percentages in tables may not equal 100% due to rounding or missing answer categories.

Methodology

This report is based on a telephone survey of 503 adults aged 18 years or older who reside in California. It complements a national telephone survey of 1,015 adults. The interviews with California residents were conducted in January 2000 and averaged 28 minutes in length. The interviews were conducted using a random sample of households in California and a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the region covered had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. The margin of error for the 503 randomly selected California adults is +/– 4 percentage points.

The questionnaire was designed by Public Agenda, and all interpretation of the data reflected in this report was done by Public Agenda. As in all surveys, question order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these, including extensively pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked.

About the Author

John Immerwahr is a Senior Research Fellow at Public Agenda and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Villanova University. He has written several previous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K–12* (1999); *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education* (1998); *Preserving the Higher Education Legacy: A Conversation with California Leaders* (1995); and *The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System* (1993). In addition, he has authored and co-authored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including the groundbreaking national study, *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994) and, for the 1996 National Education Summit of the nation's governors and business leaders, *Americans' Views on Standards: An Assessment by Public Agenda* (1996). Other state-specific studies written by Dr. Immerwahr include *What Our Children Need: South Carolinians Look at Public Education* (1996) and *The Broken Contract: Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education* (1993).

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98-1 *Concept Paper: A National Center to Address Higher Education Policy,* by Patrick M. Callan (March 1998). Describes the purposes of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

98-2 *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education,* by John Immerwahr (Spring 1998). A national survey of Americans' views on higher education, conducted and reported by Public Agenda.

98-3 *Organizing for Learning: The View from the Governor's Office,* by James B. Hunt Jr., Governor of North Carolina and Chair of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (June 1998). An address to the American Association for Higher Education concerning opportunity in higher education.

98-4 *Tidal Wave II Revisited: A Review of Earlier Enrollment Projections for California Higher Education,* by Gerald C. Hayward, David W. Breneman and Leobardo F. Estrada (September 1998). Finds that earlier forecasts of a surge in higher education enrollments are accurate.

98-5 *The Challenges Facing California Higher Education: A Memorandum to the Next Governor of California,* by David W. Breneman (September 1998). Concludes that the next governor should give serious consideration to exploring a new Master Plan for Higher Education.

98-6 *Federal Tuition Tax Credits and State Higher Education Policy: A Guide for State Policy Makers,* by Kristin D. Conklin (December 1998). Examines the implications of the new federal income tax provisions on students and their families, and makes recommendations for state higher education policy.

98-7 *Higher Education Governance: Balancing Institutional and Market Influences,* by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., Kathy Reeves Bracco, Patrick M. Callan, and Joni E. Finney (November 1998). Describes the structural relationships that affect institutional efficacy in higher education, and argues that effective state policy achieves a balance between institutional and market forces.

98-8 *The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education: An Agenda for Policy Research,* by Dennis Jones, Peter Ewell, and Aims McGuinness (December 1998). Argues that due to substantial changes in the landscape of postsecondary education, new state-level policy frameworks must be developed and implemented.

99-1 *Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education,* by John Immerwahr (January 1999). Reports the views of those most involved with decision-making about higher education, based on a survey and focus groups conducted by Public Agenda.

99-2 *South Dakota: Developing Policy-Driven Change in Higher Education,* by Mario Martinez (June 1999). Describes the processes for change in higher education that government, business and higher education leaders are creating and implementing in South Dakota.

99-3 *State Spending for Higher Education in the Next Decade: The Battle to Sustain Current Support,* by Harold A. Hovey (July 1999). This fiscal forecast of state and local spending patterns finds that the vast majority of states will face significant fiscal deficits over the next eight years, which will in turn lead to increased scrutiny of higher education in almost all states, and to curtailed spending for public higher education in many states.

00-1 *A State-by-State Report Card on Higher Education: Prospectus* (March 2000). The National Center is developing a state-by-state report card that compares and evaluates each state's performance in higher education. The goal of the report card is to stimulate the creation of state policies that enhance opportunity and achievement in higher education.

00-2 *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American and Hispanic—View Higher Education,* by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (May 2000). This report by Public Agenda finds that Americans overwhelmingly see higher education as essential for economic mobility; parents overwhelmingly believe that their children must go to college; and African American and Hispanic parents value higher education especially highly. The report is based on the most extensive survey ever conducted on public views about higher education.

The following reports by John Immerwahr compare state residents' views on higher education to those of Americans generally:

00-2b *Great Expectations: How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education* (May 2000).
00-2c *Great Expectations: How Floridians View Higher Education* (August 2000).
00-2d *Great Expectations: How Coloradans View Higher Education* (August 2000).
00-2e *Great Expectations: How Californians View Higher Education* (August 2000).

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